



## Alcimededes

The dubiously-named practice of “Honour Attacks,” which can range from beatings to murder, has once again hit the headlines. A recent Freedom of Information (FOI) study by the Iranian and Kurdish Women’s Rights Organisation (IKWRO) has concluded that the number of such attacks in the UK has increased to 2823 in the past year.<sup>1</sup> Causes for the attacks include refusing an arranged marriage, having a relationship of which the family disapproves, being the victim of a sexual assault, and seeking a divorce.

IKWRO approached all 52 police forces throughout the UK and received data from 39 of them. IKWRO estimated that there would have been a further 500 cases reported had they received figures from the remaining thirteen forces. Twelve of the forces submitted figures from 2009 for comparison and this demonstrated that there had been a 57% increase in honour attacks during this time period. The three most commonly-affected regions were London, West Midlands and West Yorkshire.

In his foreword to *2001: A Space Odyssey*, Arthur C Clarke stated that,

“Behind every man now alive stand 30 ghosts, for that is the ratio by which the dead outnumber the living.”<sup>2</sup>

Although the accuracy of this claim is highly debatable, it certainly evokes a rather supernatural and spooky image. Clarke’s suggestion also highlights the problems that over-population may bring, most notably with concerns over a lack of resources, struggles with effective waste disposal, increased poverty and crime, and global warming.

The Earth’s population recently hit seven billion, an event that was reported across the planet with many babies (*or perhaps, more correctly, their over-enthusiastic parents and hospitals*) each laying claim to this title. However, a 2009 study by the UN Development Programme suggested that Russia will reverse this trend as its population will actually decrease by approximately a third by the year 2050, to 116 million.<sup>3</sup> The Report suggested that emphasis should be placed on Russians adopting healthy lifestyles and exercise, with additional changes to social services provisions to accommodate the ageing population. However, the Russian government has decided to adopt a different approach to the problem by passing legislation in October 2011 that will restrict its notoriously lax abortion laws, making abortion increasingly difficult to legally obtain, with a time-limit of 12 weeks (up to 22 weeks in rare exceptions).<sup>4</sup> The Russian authorities hope that this decision will help stem the predicted reduction in population.

Such a policy change is obviously proving controversial, but Russia’s approach is not the first time that abortion has been used for

population control. In 1978, China introduced its notorious “one-child policy” for its citizens, although official figures suggest that this only applies to approximately one third of the population, with exemptions for minority groups and rural families.<sup>5</sup> Despite the “official” line on this strategy, there have been widespread reports of forced abortions on those women who have become pregnant for a second time, even though such forced abortions were supposedly outlawed in 2002. In addition, China introduced a ban in 2004 on the abortion of female foetuses in an attempt to counteract the gender imbalance of 117 males being born for every 100 females.<sup>6</sup>

Very commonly, the issue of death certification lands at the feet of the most junior member of the medical team. Such a practice would suggest that it requires little experience and training. However, two problems have recently been highlighted relating to the manner in which death certificates are completed that challenge this idea.

Firstly, a study by London Pathologist Ian Proctor has demonstrated that “smoking” rarely features on the certificate as a cause of death.<sup>7</sup> In his report, which considered 2128 death certificates issued by a large London teaching hospital between 2003 and 2009, smoking was named as the underlying cause of death in only two certificates, and was mentioned in the Part II section on ten occasions. For alcohol-related deaths, alcohol was cited in 57% of the Part I forms. Dr Proctor has suggested that the stigma associated with smoking being a major factor in a death may cause the doctor not to mention it, possibly in the hope that this will reduce anguish to the family. However, it was interesting that such a consideration did not extend to alcohol being mentioned on the certificates.

Secondly, concern has been raised about the rising numbers of “narrative verdicts” that have been issued by Coroners in recent years. Narrative verdicts allow the circumstances surrounding the death to be recorded, although the cause of death is not attributed to any named individual. Writing in the BMJ, Prof David Gunnell *et al.*<sup>8</sup> have suggested that this change in verdict could skew statistics on suicides and reduce the reliability of figures gathered by the Office of National Statistics, as well as distort targets for suicide reduction: the ONS can have problems coding narrative verdicts and will default to classifying them as “accidental.”

In 2001, there were 111 narrative verdicts compared with 3012 in 2009, and a suicide figure of 4648 for England and Wales (2009).

New and very detailed guidelines have been issued by the National Institute of Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) on the

management of deliberate self harm (DSH).<sup>9</sup> NICE has suggested that self-harmers should be offered long-term psychological support and healthcare professionals should discuss coping mechanisms with the individuals concerned. The 335 page guidelines are certainly welcome reading for those doctors who deal with such a relatively common problem, although the document sadly fails to give advice on how anyone can find time to read it.

A recent report by the Homicide Review Advisory Group has called for the issue of mandatory life imprisonment for murder to be overturned in England and Wales.<sup>10</sup> The group, which comprises of judges, academics and QCs, has suggested that automatic life imprisonment for murder, which replaced the death penalty in 1965, should be re-considered as there are exceptions (e.g. a mercy killing attracts the same sentence as a serial killing) that should allow for judicial discretion. In addition, they argue that, as other crimes attract fixed sentences, so should murder.

Such a change in policy would be regarded by many people as resulting in undue leniency towards serious criminals and could be therefore be politically unwise. However, the call for reform of murder laws is frequently simmering with the Director of Public Prosecution Kier Starmer QC wading into the debate in 2010 when

he claimed support for an American-style 1st and 2nd degree murder system.<sup>11</sup>

## References

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